

# The relationship between youth celebrations and road trauma in young people

## **AUTHOR**

Joanne Kemp

## **ORGANISATION**

Youthsafe  
PO Box 3023  
Putney, NSW, 2112

### Youth Celebrations

Parties and celebrations are an inherent part of becoming an adult. They provide young people with an opportunity to socialise with friends, meet people and to celebrate significant life events. However a combination of certain factors can increase the risk of injury to young people when they celebrate, including when they travel to, from and between parties.

### Youthsafe Approach to Safe Celebrating

Effective safe celebrating strategies and initiatives require a broader perspective than simply targeting youth and their families. They must adopt a multi-strategic approach in order to foster positive safe celebrating relationships and messages that flow between individuals and their local schools, peers, community and culture.<sup>1</sup> Youthsafe's research has also revealed that due to their spontaneous, unsupervised and unplanned nature, young people are at greater risk of injury during minor celebrations.<sup>2</sup> These are smaller, local or neighbourhood events and activities that often have a primary focus on alcohol and drug consumption and frequently occur in locations with limited safe transport options, such as parks, beaches, riversides and private homes. When combined with adolescents' inexperience, vulnerability to peer influence and propensity for risk taking and sensation seeking behaviour, the injury risks associated with minor celebrations may not be understood or accepted, let alone adequately planned for and managed

### Transport Issues and Minor Celebrations

Groups of young people congregating in shared public spaces are often perceived as a threat to public safety and 'moved on' by police. In fact, almost half (48%) the people issued with directions to 'move on' are under 17<sup>3</sup> Exacerbating this is a lack of suitable youth entertainment events and facilities; easy access to alcohol<sup>4</sup>; privatisation of public spaces such as

shopping centres; and attempts to 'design out' young people from public spaces.<sup>5</sup> This tends to push young peoples' celebrations from relatively safe areas out onto the 'fringes'. This, in turn, encourages unsafe celebrating choices such as accepting a lift with a driver affected by alcohol, drugs, or fatigue; distracting an inexperienced driver; overcrowding vehicles; not wearing seatbelts; drunk walking / bike riding / skateboarding.

Driving is both exciting and risky for young people and is often a central aspect of adolescent social activities. Young people's celebrations frequently involve showing off driving skills or going for a drive with no fixed direction or purpose.<sup>6</sup> However, inexperience with managing road risks and their consequences can lead to overconfidence and deliberately dangerous driving. Further, carrying passengers substantially increases the risk of crashing for young drivers. Passengers, particularly if intoxicated, can provide distractions and peer pressure to be reckless. Simply put, the greater the number of peer age passengers, the greater the crash risk is for novice drivers<sup>7</sup>

Minor celebrations thus increase the potential for motor vehicle crashes involving young drivers, passengers and pedestrians. When day of the week and time of day are taken into account, the time period for the highest number of fatalities for road users under 26 years of age is Friday night / early Saturday morning and Saturday night / early Sunday morning. More than two-thirds of fatalities among young people in NSW happen between 6pm and 6am.<sup>8</sup> Further, when young people drink alcohol, their inexperience with both driving and alcohol greatly increases their risk of crashing. In 2002, approximately 23% of fatal crashes in the 17-20 year age group were attributed to blood alcohol content<sup>9</sup> P-plates zero alcohol restriction means they may still be over the legal limit and affected by alcohol the day after drinking. In the year 2000, motor vehicle crashes accounted for over a quarter of all deaths among 15-19 year olds<sup>10</sup> Alcohol use has been repeatedly identified as a major contributor to road-related morbidity and mortality. Data from the Federal Office of Road Safety indicates that intoxication was implicated in 42% of deaths in adult and youth pedestrians in Australia in 1997, and that intoxicated passengers were twice as likely as sober passengers to leave their seat belt off.<sup>11</sup>

The introduction of new laws from 1 July 2007 affecting young drivers, particularly new passenger restrictions for P1 drivers, will also impact on young people's safety and transport needs. Whilst the limit on passengers, in addition to the graduated licensing scheme, may produce a welcome reduction in the road-related trauma among young people, it also raises some potential difficulties, especially in rural and regional areas where safe transport options are either limited or non-existent. At present, the onus is generally on young drivers, passengers and pedestrians to make their own, often high risk, arrangements. This is despite the fact that community and media portrayals of young people frequently sensationalise incidents and portray young people as the source of their own problems. However, these obstacles can and have been overcome in numerous community-based, multi-strategic approaches via networks of agencies, with varying expertise, building partnerships, and sharing available funding, resources and information.

## Future Directions

Focus groups with young people, key informant interviews and forums with community based professionals in rural and metropolitan regions identified a number of priority areas to mitigate the risk factors outlined above. Those of relevance here include: Safe and accessible transport when and where young people need it. Safe, accessible and appealing youth space and facilities that allow young people to celebrate in supervised, drug and alcohol free environments. Finally, support for parents and young people to make safe celebrating choices with access to evidence-based, relevant and current support and advice.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Safe celebrating for young people is an issue that tends to fall between the gaps. It is difficult to find a body willing or able to take a lead role and is easy to dilute or over-simplify the issue by tagging it a road safety, or a health, or a drug and alcohol issue. The fact is that it belongs to all three. Commitment, networking and cooperation is therefore required between government, non-government and industry groups to resolve issues and take responsibility.

## References

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Hanson, D., Hanson, J., Vardon, P., McFarlane, K., Lloyd, J., Muller, R. & Durrheim, D. (2005). "The injury iceberg: an ecological approach to planning sustainable community safety interventions" *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, Vol. 16(1): 5 – 10.
  - <sup>2</sup> Hunter, K., Alcock, J., Elkington, J., (2004) *Developing Safe Celebrating Strategies for Young People Guide*
  - <sup>3</sup> NSW Ombudsman, (1999) *Policing Public Safety: Report under s.6 of the Crimes Legislation Amendment (Police and Public Safety) Act 1998*, Sydney, 1999, p.229
  - <sup>4</sup> Youthsafe, (2006), *Working Together for Safer Celebrations in NSW*
  - <sup>5</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, (2005), *Space Invaders? Young People and Public Space Forum Report*, Melbourne, Victoria
  - <sup>6</sup> Op cit. Youthsafe (2006)
  - <sup>7</sup> Lam, L.T., Norton, R., Woodward, M., Connor, J. & Ameratunga, S. (2003). "Passenger carriage and car crash injury: a comparison between younger and older drivers", *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, Vol. 35: 861 - 867
  - <sup>8</sup> Australian Transport Safety Bureau, (2005), *road Deaths Australia: 2004 Statistical Summary*
  - <sup>9</sup> NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, (2003)
  - <sup>10</sup> ibid
  - <sup>11</sup> Federal Office of Road Safety, (1999), cited in *National Drug Strategy Survey*, (2001)
  - <sup>12</sup> Op. cit. Youthsafe (2006)